

Book Reviews

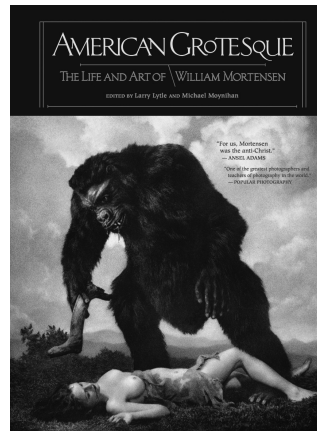
Dean Brierly

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Discoveries

American Grottesque: The Life and Art of William Mortensen

Feral House
300 pages | HC | \$45



William Mortensen was one of the most reviled and celebrated photographers in the history of the medium. Ansel Adams, Group f/64 advocate and staunch defender of the “purist” approach to photography, manifested his disdain for everything Mortensen stood for by famously branding him “the anti-Christ.” Yet the very things Adams detested made Mortensen arguably the most influential and imitated photographer in the world, at least during his heyday of the 1930s and ‘40s.

Consider Mortensen’s penchant for outré visual narratives—laced with generous amounts of sex and sadism—manifest in such notorious images as “L’Amour,” which depicts a partially clothed maiden lying helpless before a hulking, slaving ape—a vision simultaneously disturbing, surreal and humorous in a pitch-black

vein. No other photographer of the era was so enthusiastic and adept at pushing the bounds of good taste and acceptable subject matter.

Perhaps even more damning to the guardians of photographic sanctity was Mortensen’s direct manipulation of the photographic print, which challenged notions of what a photograph could or should look like. Shifting trends and tastes eventually relegated Mortensen to the margins of history; this handsome monograph from Feral House aims to bring his unique accomplishments before a wider and hopefully more enlightened and appreciative audience. Replete with well known and seldom-seen images and featuring incisive essays from Larry Lytle and Michael Moynihan, *American Grottesque* deserves pride of place on any self-respecting collector’s bookshelf.

Photographer’s Paradise: Turbulent America 1960-1990

Glitterati Incorporated
392 pages | HC | \$95



It’s tempting to think of Jean-Pierre Laffont as the Zelig of photojournalism in America during the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s. The Algerian-born French photographer who came to the United States in 1964 to “visually capture the spirit of the times” was at the center of virtually every major story during those decades. Urban decay and unrest. The cultural revolution wrought by sex, drugs and rock and roll. The antiwar movement. Women’s liberation. Black power. The Ku Klux Klan. Political assassinations. The oil embargo. Watergate and impeachment. The decline of the auto industry and the crisis of the American farmer.

It hardly seems possible that one individual could have photographed all these and so many other stories—much less captured them with such conviction, insight and empathy. Moreover, the issues and the implications in Laffont’s photographs retain their relevance, as he notes in the book’s introduction.

“When I look back at the individual photographs I took during this quarter-century period, the images at first seem to depict a ball of confusion: riots, demonstrations, disintegration, collapse and conflict. Taken together, the images show the chaotic, often painful birth of the country we live in today...a place where a black president, married gay couples, and women executives are part of our everyday lives.”